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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 001045

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TUNISIA - DEMOCRATIC REFORM STRATEGY TO SUPPORT
FREEDOM AGENDA

REF: STATE 80607

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Tunisia has a lot of things going for it as a country, but the speedy clip of political liberalization is not one of them. The good news about Tunisia is that there is no organized extremist opposition that we know of. The bad news is that there is no organized opposition of any kind. Although theories abound regarding who really runs the show-President Ben Ali's extended family, powerful advisers in the presidential palace? -our analysis is that ultimately Ben Ali calls the shots. The way to change Tunisia is to convince President Ben Ali to take the steps that would allow for true political reform.

2. (C) It is our consensus (and one that is increasingly shared by the EU and other embassies) that progress in two key areas would make all the difference to the pace of political reform: freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. With truly free media and unfettered access to the Internet, Tunisia's highly educated population would soon spark international debate that would erase the current apathy of Tunisians about their political system and spur demands for change. If, in addition to saying and writing whatever they want, Tunisians were free to gather as they please, real opposition political parties headed by genuine and competitive candidates would inevitably emerge.

3. (C) The way to there from here is through President Ben Ali. In power for almost 18 years, he has shown no compunction about cracking down on anything that could be conceived as a threat to his continued longevity in office. He is also fond of speaking loud and long about democracy while fully controlling the political process. He must be convinced that to continue in this way is not in his or Tunisia's long-term interest, and that we can help him change direction. Our message to him should be that while we do not seek regime change, we expect real transition to democracy. We must make clear to him that U.S. policy goals and regional realities will no longer tolerate the "Tunisian timetable" of reform touted by the GOT. The core of our message is that at the end of the current five-year term to which Ben Ali was elected in October 2004, Tunisia should be a country in which real candidates are ready to run in real elections.

4. (C) What we would like to do:

Within one year:

a. Freedom of Expression: The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Tunis in November of this year, gives us an excellent opportunity to make progress on the issue of freedom of expression. We should make clear to Tunisia via very high-level U.S. political engagements that our cooperation in helping Tunisia shine as a host (which is extremely important to the government) and achieve its goals will depend entirely on progress in loosening up state control of what can be said and written. Specifically, our measures of progress or milestones for the GOT will be:

- Unblock websites
- Accept pending applications for new publications (many have languished for years)
- Allow "e-papers" to publish in Tunisia (related to first item above)
- Institute a transparent process for authorizing private broadcast media, including allowing Radio Sawa to open an FM station in Tunisia
- End police/judicial harassment of outspoken individuals

b. Freedom of Assembly:

- Authorize independent NGOs to operate
- Allow EU funding for the Tunisian League of Human Rights to go forward.

Within two years:

a. Freedom of Expression:

-- Tunisia shoots up the chart in Reporters Without Borders and other rankings of freedom of expression.
-- Independent publications and broadcasters reflect a variety of opinions on political issues.

b. Freedom of Assembly

-- New political parties register and begin to work openly toward participation in the 2009 parliamentary and presidential campaign.

15. (C) Washington support we need to do this:
Essentially only political. Tunisia is not a poor country, and plenty of capable Tunisians are ready if given the chance. We are thus eager to take a more forward-leaning and aggressive posture on political reform in Tunisia but would require the following commitment from Washington to do so:

a. Engagement: To convince a proud, moderate, entrenched government to change its ways, we'll have to change ours. For understandable reasons, Tunisia is the country that is the afterthought in North Africa. Tunisia is already on board with U.S. goals in many areas, the stakes are certainly greater elsewhere, and the pace of change more exhilarating, perhaps, in countries that have farther to go than Tunisia would. Yet it does not escape the GOT's notice that high-ranking American visitors find the time to visit Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, and find polite excuses about why they'll have to skip Tunisia this time. Given its "dodge the bullet" strategy, that suits the GOT just fine. High-level visits to drive home our message are essential to our hopes that Tunisia will hear it and act on it.

b. Consistency: The Tunisians have mastered their talking points and rarely stray from them in any encounter. To be successful in engaging them, we must do the same. We cannot allow them their tactic of complaining that one interlocutor or another has simply got it in for them, and that the person in front of them is different in that s/he understands the--positive, of course--"reality" of the GOT's policies or actions. If we pursue this strategy, we must disabuse them of this notion by ensuring that our approach and talking points are consistent in all encounters with GOT representatives.

c. Convince the G-8, EU, and especially France, that our approach is the best policy for Tunisia (see para 8 below).

16. (SBU) Programs we need that could help us get there:

Two main programs, one each in the areas of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, would serve as the springboard for other eventual programs. In fact, this is a combined policy/program tactic, since we are likely to encounter pushback from the GOT on pursuing these program ideas. Thus, it will take a sustained political push just to get the programs up and running. Only then, can we hope for programmatic returns. For that reason, we believe pushing only two straightforward programs is more desirable than presenting a long wish list that the GOT can delay through its bureaucracy while pretending to be accommodating. There is no point in working on elections, for example, when candidates and parties cannot say what they want, or even meet as recognized political entities. Electoral programs are for later.

For now:

a. A MEPI media training program exclusively devoted to Tunisia. This program would require a full assessment of what needs to be done and a strong package of programs to get there.

b. A MEPI training program designed to strengthen freedom of assembly and, ultimately, training for political parties. This would involve opening an IRI or NDI office in Tunisia.

17. (C) What we stand to lose:

The caveat emptor section of this strategy is a short one, but must be highlighted. The Ben Ali government has shown time and again that it takes public criticism very, very badly. For example, the GOT withdrew its ambassador from Washington in 2004 over the inclusion of Tunisia in a list of countries criticized by the Department in its World Press Freedom Day statement. Therefore it is probable that aggressive criticism and demands for political change on our part will be met with "retaliatory" measures in areas of importance to us. Our excellent historic military ties with Tunisia and our sometimes sporadic (if currently improving) but important counterterrorism cooperation could suffer. Tunisia's moderate stance and behind-the-scenes help on issues like Iraq and the peace process (including stated plans to allow an Israeli diplomatic presence back in Tunisia) might vanish.

18. (C) What others are doing:

Key to Ben Ali's calculation on the need to change will be whether he is feeling the heat from others, particularly the EU and France. Through the Barcelona Process, Tunisia has committed to economic and political reforms that are supposed to be finalized in 2008. The Tunisians have brashly refused to implement some of these reforms, even at the cost of millions of dollars in cash transfers and technical assistance. To date, the EU has largely acquiesced in the face of this Tunisian backsliding, mainly because its number one priority is guaranteeing Tunisian cooperation on controlling emigration to Southern Europe. Part of our challenge in Tunisia will be to bring the EU and G-8 on board regarding a tougher message on political reform. This would prevent the Tunisians from parrying our message by claiming that their EU agreements prove their commitment to reform. The EU is important, but France is key. Ben Ali has calculated so far - rightly in our view - that Paris, and President Chirac in particular - definitely favor stability over democracy. As long as that holds true, it will lessen the impact of our efforts. Getting Paris to change its tune, or at least demonstrate constructive ambiguity, would ratchet up the pressure considerably.

19. (U) Post has had a DCM-chaired MEPI committee from the beginning. We will institute quarterly reports, in addition to our other MEPI reporting.
HUDSON